

The Seven Deadly Sins of Community Programming

By Liora Salter
*Department of Communication Studies
Simon Fraser University*

*T*his September, the second national conference of independent video producers, entitled "The Fifth Network," was held in Toronto. Most of the participants had attended the first conference in Vancouver in 1973; many had extensive experience not only in producing video but also in the often fruitless negotiations with cable operators and the CRTC in attempting to get those programmes before a viewing public. Almost everyone present was a veteran of numerous government projects funded to "use video as a catalyst for social change" or a "tool for community animation". No one had much tolerance for further rhetoric as a result.

*From Keeble
Of Premier To
Hardin of APBBC*

One panel was devoted to cable. For the most part the debate ranged over the well established issues: the lack of access for independent video, the strengths and problems in CRTC policy, etc. Gordon Keeble represented the cable industry as well as Premier cablevision, where he is Vice-President in charge of Programming. Michael Helm represented the CRTC. Herschel Hardin, of the Association of Public Broadcasting in British Columbia stated the case for community control of community cable systems, citing his experience with the attempt by a cooperative in Victoria to gain ownership of their local system from Premier cable. I spoke more generally; after ten years in community programme production (with Kenomadiwin and Vancouver Co-operative Radio) and several years as an academic teaching courses in community media, I felt it might be time to unmask some of the terminology surrounding this work. Here is the text of my comments:

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I am going to talk about the seven deadly sins, the ones in community cable programming. Although I have been a community programmer for ten years, I am going to confess to none of these sins. I have a worse confession to make. I seldom watch community cable. I assume everyone who has been involved with community production is at least a little bit guilty however. A little bit, like pregnancy, death and taxes, has a tendency to go a long way.

The first sin is described in all its pornographic splendor in CRTC policy, by enterprising cable operators and even by community programmers (although they should be forgiven for their indiscretion in these matters; they often get paid for their service). It is the sin of "access", or as it is otherwise known, the "revolving door theory of programming".

The "revolving door theory of programming": one half hour for the gays followed by one half hour for the blacks, followed by one half hour for women, followed by one half hour for the handicapped. The theory, and there are many academic articles on the subject, is that if we can make a little more room on the television screen or at the political bargaining table for gays, or blacks, or women or the handicapped, the problems they face can be negotiated to solution.

Never mind that these groups taken together constitute the majority of the population, not "special interests." Never mind that the total television environment into which these programmes are dropped counteracts every message. Never mind, as well, that even the most sophisticated political actors (and these include gays, women, blacks, etc) cannot even locate the bargaining table where political decisions are made. Just produce another special on day care, or abortion, or junk food. Taken to excess, that is the sin of "access".

The reason usually given for the production of half hour access programming by and for women, blacks, gays, etc. is the intrinsic experience of production. That is the next deadly sin. I will call it "producer's consciousness". As the theory goes, it takes every bit as much effort to produce a bad programme as a good one, or alternative, if the audience can see sweat, they will know the product is genuine. In academic journals, this sin is called "the mirroring capacity of small format video". It is said that people can "talk back to their television sets". It is described in terms of the beneficial effects that community production can have on group process and participation (a counter force to the alienating effects of modern society) when citizens see themselves reflected on the video screen. Never mind that the mirror is two way; just ignore the audience and perhaps they will go away.

This leads directly into a discussion of the third deadly sin. I will call this one, for lack of a better name, "anti-ratings". There is an underlying logical paradigm here. It parallels: If A equals B, and if B equals C, then A will equal C. In community programming the logic is:

*Logical Fallacy
And The Sin Of
Anti-Ratings*

If mass television programming is demeaning and
if mass programming is produced with reference to ratings and
if ratings depend on maximizing the number of people who
can be induced to watch and
if community programming should not be demeaning:
then community programming should not be produced with
reference to ratings and
therefore, no one should be induced to watch community
programming
thus the less people watching, the better the programme.

The sin of "anti-ratings".

Now nothing produces programming with less people watching, or "good community programming" faster than the use of the "anti-expert expert". Everyone should recognize this sin; in more unsophisticated times it was called "talking heads". Today it takes its point of reference from the CBC.

You know how it is on the CBC. If they can get Linus Pauling on a direct long distance call to comment on the significance of talking budgie birds in Nanaimo, B.C., that is public affairs. The authority of the speaker created the newsworthiness of the event. Any freelancer will understand the problem.

There is no way that Linus Pauling is going to appear on community cable, even to discuss the proliferation of nuclear power plants. What we have done instead is to create a kind of second generation expert. Instead of attempting new approaches, the same outspoken leaders of a few citizen groups are called upon again and again to voice an opinion on whatever events have just been covered in the mainstream press. The "anti-expert expert".

The reason that Linus Pauling would never appear on community cable has nothing to do with a decision he may or may not have made about the worthiness of the medium. It has more to do with CRTC and cable operators policy and with the fifth deadly sin "homegrown blues". Pauling never lived in Victoria or Mississauga. Never mind that the nuclear power plant they are discussing in Port Hope was planned in Ottawa, New York and points beyond. The only "legitimate community programming" would be four worthy Port Hope citizens discussing the issue on a panel. If it is not local both in origin

*Live on Tape,
Dead On Arrival
Audience of 9*

and in all its production elements, so the theory goes, it is not community.

The sixth deadly sin is linked to what is often called "live" programming. To borrow a title, I will call it "dead on arrival". An example: Every year when the CRTC comes to town, the local community cable outfit wires up the hearing room and broadcasts the hearings "live". Eight hours of CRTC Commissioners and cable operators discussing "viable" and "community" and they have the nerve to call it "live". No commentary of background is provided to make sense of the event. No interviews lend drama or controversy. It is probably the most expensive programming in the world produced for an audience of nine people, the CRTC Commissioners. I guess if one subscribed to "anti-ratings" consciousness, it is a very successful programme indeed.

The seventh sin is the most deadly of all because it is the hardest to avoid and hits most closely to home: "gold fever". You can see it in every city: "If only community groups had more equipment or more money, or had control of the mythical 10% of gross cable system revenues, which always seems to disappear in depreciation and administration costs, then community programming would come into its own".

It is not that those struck by "gold fever" are wrong, but only that the struggle to gain control of the 10% begins to take up all of the time and energy and eventually replaces the programming urge. The heart goes out of the effort and into a battle with Premier or Rogers or even the CRTC. If citizen programmers are being "bought off" or co-opted, it is often without receiving fair recompense and merely for asking.

I have been entirely negative. If I had to put my ten years experience into a few sentences what would I say: that community programming is like talking on a telephone. It works when it creates an intensity of experience, and when you know what you want to say and whom you are talking to. If you can get on a city bus and visualize 3 of your fellow 20 passengers actually viewing your programming all the way to the end, that is community programming.